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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

The registration of boys and girls between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, which is now proceeding, foreshadows a more significant change in the pattern of our national life than many more spectacular events. It is a first step towards extending the responsibility of the community for the welfare of its youth up to the age of eighteen.

REGISTRATION FROM 16 TO 18

In British fashion the step is tentative, hesitating and cautious, but it is a move in the right direction. Boys and girls are required to register ; they are invited, not compelled, to attend an interview at which their attention will be called to ways in which they can serve their country, and they will be encouraged to join some organisation for this purpose. While every effort will be made to induce boys not already associated with some organisation and not otherwise occupied to undertake some form of pre-service training, the whole scheme is under the direction of the Education authorities, and it can for this reason be made to contribute to a genuine educational purpose.

It is surprising that objection should be taken in some quarters to this measure and that its possibilities as a means of educational advance should not be perceived. Compulsory education up to the age of fourteen is universally accepted and approved, and all educators are agreed about the urgent need of further provision for the critical years of adolescence. Everything, of course, depends on the kind of training that is given, but the necessary condition of providing the right training is to bring the whole of youth within the scope of a national plan.

It has been wisely decided that every possible use should be made of the voluntary organisations. This has indeed been emphasised in a way that almost suggests that the Board of Education is more anxious to avoid stirring up criticism and opposition than to make a bold use of the opportunity. The absence in the official guidance that has been offered of any imaginative presentation of the opportunity, of a note of urgency and of a challenging appeal for service has caused disappointment and disquiet.

The leaders of the youth organisations of the Churches have issued an appeal urging the clergy, ministers and youth leaders to make the fullest use of the opportunity, and thirty thousand copies of a leaflet on the subject have been distributed through the denominational youth organisations. Here also the note of extreme urgency and exceptional opportunity is somewhat lacking, nor is the nature of the opportunity made to stand out with sufficient clearness. The brief explanatory statement which was immediately required may not have been the place for this, and it is welcome news that a fuller pamphlet is in preparation.

THE SPIRIT OF YOUTH

The headmaster of one of our public schools has allowed me to see the text of two sermons that he delivered recently in the school chapel. He urged on those whom he was addressing the necessity of hard and clear thinking about the kind of world that they

want to have after the war, since it is the coming generation that will have to live in it and youth must have a large hand in creating it. He laid down two principles, about which he believed that millions in this country are really agreed, even though they may not yet see very clearly what they involve. The first is that we are fighting this war, not primarily in defence of privilege, or of our country, or of our empire, or even of ourselves, but for what we believe to be right against what we believe to be wrong. The second is that we are resolved to apply to the problems of peace the same selfless vigour which at present inspires the whole-hearted mobilisation of the nation's will against attack from without. If we are fighting for what is *right*, is it right that in this nominally Christian country a considerable proportion of our fellow-citizens are living below the line of decent nutrition ? Is it right that there should be slums, poverty, unemployment, disease and insecurity ?

These are the notes which need to be constantly struck, though they will be convincing only on the lips of those for whom they are the expression of an inflexible personal decision.

Nothing that I have read exposes more clearly the heart of the problem than an admirable letter which appeared in *The Times Educational Supplement* of February 7th. The writer says :

" In an heroic age the appeal should be to the heroic . . . Youth wants to be treated seriously, to play its part with older men and women as equals in a total war. To treat young people differently is to treat them with contempt, and to perpetuate and increase the feeling of inferiority which is common among the young when they compare their significance with that of their elders.

" The Board have under-rated the spirit of youth, as indeed the Government as a whole have consistently under-rated the capacity for sacrifice in the country as a whole. Youth's heroes of to-day are the Spitfire pilots, the submarine commanders, the tank crews, the Russian guerrillas ; they are not the excellent but less exciting gentlemen who instruct them at evening institutes, or lead their rompings in the local Youth Centre. The qualities they admire in their heroes are not ' militaristic ' in a jack-booted ' brutal and licentious ' sense, but courage, endurance, initiative, and perfect correlation of mind and hand and eye. These are the soldierly virtues, but they are also the manly virtues, and our tragedy is that in peace they have so little chance of expression. No boy worth anything will respond to an appeal which demands nothing from him, which is apparently satisfied with mere membership of any organisation however ineffective. This is not the appeal of Leonidas, of Garibaldi, or of Winston Churchill ; it is the lowest common denominator of the lily-livered."

The blame cannot, however, be laid wholly at the door of the Government. The nation itself is at fault. No Government in a free country could have recourse to measures for which public opinion is unprepared. The very notion of discipline and of living hard is frowned on in many quarters, and even the very mild disciplinary note that is now sounded has met with resentment. The root of the trouble, as one of those whom I have consulted writes to me, lies in " the whole sloppy and over-optimistic view of life which has been part of the general escapism of this country in recent years."

One fundamental reason for the failure to make a bold and rousing appeal to youth is that this country has not yet made up its mind with sufficient clearness about the kind of society it wants to have after the war and the price it is prepared to pay for it. The urgent necessity of enlisting to the full the vital and spiritual energies of youth, which is the greatest asset that the nation possesses, is an additional reason for the more precise definition of what the allies intend to do with victory when they have won it, for which Sir Stafford Cripps recently made a powerful plea.

There are, of course, dangers in an appeal on the lines that have been suggested. There is the risk of which one of our members writes to me, that children in the " romantic-adventurous " stage of their development, should come to regard war, with all its horrors and inhumanities as the normal activity of life and as a good thing in itself ; as in the case

of a small boy of his acquaintance who, after being taken to see a film of the Bomber Command, expressed his disappointment " because there wasn't more bombing." What if the rising generation in this country should grow up to hold the Nazi view that war is life and life is war ?

A bad mess will be made of the whole business unless a genuine educational purpose controls every activity. There is plenty of evidence that pre-service training is most valuable, even for military purposes, when its scope is wider than purely military requirements. The national interest demands that the lasting good in the broadest sense of the boy or girl should not be sacrificed to a narrow view of the immediate necessities of the war. The relative values of different forms of training have to be weighed from this standpoint. The Churches and the Christian youth organisations have a very real problem. It is not easy, as one of our members writes, to maintain contact with the boys and girls in a parish and to train them in their Christian responsibilities as citizens when their leisure hours are absorbed by fire watching, A.T.C., youth centre activities, A.R.P. lectures, night school, home work and similar claims.

THE DRIVING FORCE OF PATRIOTISM

But whatever the dangers and difficulties, the vital matter is that we should as Christians take a positive, and not a defensive, attitude towards a development which has in it immense potentialities of life. It would be a misfortune if the voluntary youth organisations were to be chiefly concerned to protect their own interests and position, and fail to take a bold and leading part in bringing about the national awakening on which the fate of our people may depend. The headquarters of the Christian youth organisations are alive to the danger, but strong efforts throughout the country will be needed if the big view, which understands the crisis in which the whole of humanity is involved, is to drive from the field the sectarian spirit and the strong pull of vested interests.

The releasing of fresh energies on a vast scale is our most urgent need. Our worst enemy is apathy, indifference, and the stagnation of death. Errors and faults can be corrected ; energy can be diverted from wrong channels into right ones. But where vitality is lacking, nothing can come to pass. It is plain from the Gospels that no human quality was more attractive to Christ than enthusiasm.

Few natural impulses can exert a stronger influence for good than love of country, when it is fully aroused. I mean, not simply as an idea presented to the intellect, but as finding embodiment in service, constructive tasks and human fellowship. In these forms it can absorb energies which, when they lack an adequate objective, seek an outlet in juvenile crime. (An article on " The Young Offender " by the Chairman of a London Juvenile Court in the current number of the *Fortnightly* must give concern to those who care about the future of the nation's youth.)

Love of country and of one's fellows is a natural, not a specifically Christian, virtue. It is an immensely powerful driving-force which may be harnessed to good purposes or perverted to evil ends. Its roots strike deep into actual life, and to ignore it is to cut ourselves off from the real life of men. Patriotism can have many meanings and many forms of expression. Our task as Christians is to fill it with a Christian meaning. If we fail to do this, instead of Christianity harnessing the energies of patriotism to the true service of man, a narrow and selfish nationalism may use religion for its own ends, which is a very different story.

What we have been considering in this letter has been the welfare of the nation, rather than the specific task of the Church. The Christian life is a perpetual and difficult tension, from which there is no escape. It is our business as Christians to identify ourselves wholeheartedly with the highest vision and noblest aspirations of our people and at the same time to discipline ourselves to view them and to help others to view them, even at their best, in the light and under the judgment of the Cross.

THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

The idea of the Christian News-Letter was born in a conversation I had with the Archbishop of Canterbury in the first week of the war. He has been from the first one of its warmest friends. He has in these last weeks before laying down his office given effective help in the launching of new plans, centering in the Christian News-Letter but reaching beyond it, about which I shall be able to tell you more in a few weeks' time.

To his wide knowledge of affairs and ripe wisdom I owe no small part of my education. It began when I spent a night at Bishopthorpe more than thirty years ago. In recent years I have been able, as secretary of the Council on the Christian Faith and the Common Life of which he is the President and Chairman, to observe at close quarters what the movement for closer co-operation between the Churches has owed to his wise leadership and to the confidence he has inspired in all connected with it, Free Churchmen as much as Anglicans.

OVERSEAS SUBSCRIPTIONS

Communication overseas becomes increasingly difficult as the war spreads ; it takes sometimes six months to receive a reply to letters to places abroad. We have decided that it is necessary in the future to accept subscriptions for overseas only for a full year. In order to avoid delays, reminders that renewal is due will be sent out three months ahead to the United States and Canada and six months ahead to other countries. Members who subscribe for friends abroad have already been informed of this plan and many have agreed to continue the subscriptions until further notice.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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